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Ideological and Technological Determinism in Deep-Space Cinema Images:

Issues in Ideology, Technological History, and Aesthetics

Serious discussion of the cinema phenomenon called "deep focus" (or great depth of field) began with a discursive series of essays by André Bazin. Prior to about 1940, there appears to be no mention of deep-space composition although "clear pictures" were often remarked upon. Since Bazin, however, considerable attention has been paid the issue of depth in the cinema image. This issue is viewed as one of the cornerstones of Bazin's theories and is mentioned prominently in most film history books. The discussion has been carried on partly by Henderson in distinguishing Bazin from Eisenstein,¹ in Charles Barr's seminal essay on Cinema-Scope,² in articles by Patrick Ogle and Jean-Louis Comolli,³ and elsewhere.⁴ The literature on "deep focus" is extensive enough to consider its discussion as a model for discovering the assumptions and directions of cinema theory making (and, by extension, the making of cinema history).

In fact, it is fruitful to confront the aesthetic, technological, and ideological assumptions in existing "deep focus" cinema theory with the rest of history. With this strategy, it may be possible to suggest by extension some more specificity and substance to the more general issues vexing current cinema theory and history.⁵ Barry Salt's efforts seem to have a similar motivation in that, even given the limitations on his work, he is trying to test theory with observation of actual films.⁶

The history of comment on "deep focus" by name began when Bazin opposed his realist espousal of it (and of the long take) to very rapid cutting technique or montage. For Bazin, cinema is best when it most closely imitates his vision of what the real world is like. This *realist/idealist* stand thus affirms the quality of the long take since it

presents "the world" in all of its "visible continuity," and of "deep focus" which allows all of the things to be clearly seen through this window on the world that is the cinema screen. For this reason, Bazin admires Welles, Wyler, and the central Italian neorealist films. The Bazinian tradition acknowledges, but seldom if ever explores, the implications of what the *mediation* of film creation processes does to the reality of the world when rendering a film. This flaw, this frequent ignoring of the fact that film is a mediated semblance of reality, lies at the heart of this realist/idealist stand.

Patrick Ogle continues Bazin's approach to film history, sharing the basic assumption that cinema history is a history of technological "improvements." This stand implicitly posits early films as primitive because they seem flat, grainy, shaky, monochrome, and silent. Later films become better as the realistic quality of the image seems to take on the "look of life itself," with full color, sound, dense visuals, and the like. Also this position which stresses technology tends to ignore the aesthetic and the ideological or, at least, to place technology above the aesthetic and beyond ideology. It implies that the technology is in control of the artist, and the affirmation of film history as a story of an always-enlarging paintbox of film tools denies possible full artistic status to *earlier* films. That is, this position posits "progress in art"—in itself a contradiction in terms.

The technological domination of cinema comment has held sway long enough. The cinema began, apparently, with inventors who desired a machine that could record reality. It continued mainly in the hands of those who took realism as their mechanical and even aesthetic guide. But the

history of the cinema is more than the story of its hardware, and the cinema theorist and historian must more skillfully marry aesthetic and other considerations to technological facts in order to produce more encompassing conclusions.

Jean-Louis Comolli's six-installment article in *Cahiers du cinéma* introduces another element into the discussion of film history, theory, and "deep focus" specifically. Comolli takes a materialist view of history and thus is at overt odds with the Bazinian tradition. He rejects the idea that the "history of cinematographic language" is a progression of an ever-increasing "technical treasury from which film-makers would freely draw."⁷ He decries that cinema history/theory which is obsessed with the "progress of the language."⁸ Above all, he seeks the *ideology* inscribed in the cinema and writes off all those who do not recognize its importance. His materialist approach means that he is concerned with the economic factors of cinema as well as with investigations based on the means of production. He centers upon the history and sociological implications of the production of realist film images, especially via deep-space illusionism. He sees the act of history writing as a reading of the past in terms of the present.

Comolli's piece is an important challenge to the current view of film history, as well as critics' goals for films. His essay certainly deserves a full English-language translation.⁹ Thus far, his work has stirred much interest among the SEFT/Screen group in England. Christopher Williams has gone so far as to write, "Comolli's project . . . poses the greatest challenge to film criticism and theory . . ." since, perhaps, Bazin.¹⁰ Williams also says that Comolli has affirmed and practiced Julia Kristeva's idea of semiology as the study of film as "signifying practice which is concerned *strictly* with the production of sense as opposed to the re-presentation of a fixed sense. . . ."¹¹

Comolli's most apparent contribution, in addition to a materialist critique of Bazin, is his call for studying films within their ideological and economic settings—using the term "ideology" to refer to the basic world view and assumptions that reside within and underpin a film work. He says that ideology structures both the form and the content of film, but that ideology and its operations are usually hidden, especially from spectators partak-

ing of the same culture as that of a film. That is, the cultural ideology or way of being is usually too much a part of the observer *in* the culture for him to see the ideology embedded in films. (Comolli implies, but does not show, how the decoding of a film via semiological methods alleviates this problem.) For example, he says that it was the immersed idealist ideology that allowed Bazin to applaud films that depicted the world on film in the way that the world looks when observed directly. Bazin's and bourgeois ideology generally wish to see a filmed world that is just like its real one, Comolli says, because that is comfortable and requires no thought/work. Then a "deep focus"/long-take realistic style was what "sold" well at the boxoffice, and, Comolli's reasoning continues, the dominant producers of films—Hollywood and its imitators—made realist films in order to make money. Thus, he says, the dominant ideology and economic forces dictated the direction and limits for the craftsmen and artists of the cinema.

This brings up a question that has lurked behind art patronage since it began—how should critics deal with the fact that what comes to be considered art many times was produced for non-artistic reasons—for a demanding patron, for money, and so on. For example, does the fact that the Church commissioned many paintings now considered classic art in any way diminish their artfulness? Is *Triumph of the Will* less a work of art because it was ordered by fascists? If even Hitler commissioned a work that emerged as beautiful, can its ideology make it less than great art? In both cases, the "patron's" ideology is certainly represented, but can *art* be critiqued on the basis of the critic's agreement or disagreement with the ideology of the works? The answer, I suspect, resides more in the critic's subjective goals for art than it does in reasoned aesthetic theory. Then, on the face of it, it seems that an ideological critique such as Comolli's is fundamentally anti-aesthetic, and thus somewhat limited.

Even within his ideological critique, Comolli is confusing. For example, at points, he implies that the dominant class produced Hollywood films that reaffirmed the realist view of the world in order to reassure the other classes, the audiences (at first the lower class and then later also the middle¹²), that the world *is* just as it looks. This was done in



order to perpetuate control (and sales?). At other points, Comolli implies that it was the bourgeois audiences who dictated film realism via their tastes and ticket-buying proclivities. The contradiction is not resolved in the six-part article.

Of course, Comolli is quite correct in insisting that film history must take economic pressures into account. Very little of this job has been done, partly, I suspect, because film studios do not want trained scholars digging around in their company records. However, until major inroads of documentary evidence are made into production financial processes, just saying that economics must be taken into account is important but is also not the end of that line.

Further, without such research, errors such as those cited by Douglas Gomery¹³ will continue to occur. Gomery's research shows that Comolli and many other film analysts have misunderstood the reasons for Warner Brothers' adoption of sound films. Gomery's careful work demonstrates the danger of relying upon existing histories when making ideological or any other kind of analyses.

Nevertheless, Comolli's critique of Bazin, Mitry, and Lebel is very strong on the level of theory. He refutes their contention that the camera is a neutral recording instrument, a passive unarticulated registration of pro-filmic events. This critique goes to the very heart of the Bazinian conception of film—the unique and one-to-one relationship between the world and the film image. The scope of this article precludes tracing out the whole realist illusionism argument, but the illusion of depth upon the plane surface of the film screen is one of the essential ways film evokes the impression of reality. Bazin felt this depth to be essential to the best in film. Comolli, a film-maker as well as a critic, undercuts this notion by pointing out the abstract nature of all depth illusions.

The presence and nature of deep-space illusions in films are important to Bazin because they give realism to the image. They are important to the technological historian since so many devices are required to produce them. And, to Comolli, depth effects in film are important since they indicate the extent to which an ideological way of representation is embedded in a mass medium.

In the observations that follow, I wish to weave

an *aesthetically historical* way through the material Comolli treats only ideologically, Ogle treats only technologically, and Bazin treats idealistically and polemically. Here, I wish to study specific deep-space images that were created and to trace these creations through a part of the history of cinema.

Depth illusionism is created in films in several highly specific ways. These methods are based upon the inescapable fact that spectators perceive films with the same physiological and psychological equipment with which they perceive real life. Many of the conventions of perception in the world carry over into understanding the cinema. The analogy has been carried very far, even to the point of comparing the eye blink to the cut and the pan to a turn of the head. McLuhan has not been the only one to observe that the cine-camera may well be thought of as an extension of human sense organs. How far this analogy should really be taken remains problematic, but current science observes the following factors to be the depth cues within films:

- (a) overlap of a nearer object over a far one (the prime cue);
- (b) comparison of relative sizes of known objects;
- (c) movement by objects within the visual field (the kinetic depth effect), especially toward and from the observer;
- (d) movement by the viewpoint, by the observer or camera;
- (e) a viewpoint which foreshortens;
- (f) reflections (such as in mirrors or in pools);
- (g) perspective (aerial, detail, and linear);
- (h) relative intensity of sounds from known objects;
- (i) cast shadows;
- (j) "attached" or "surface" shadows (modeling);
- (k) degree of highlights on objects;
- (l) relative brightness of a known source of reflection; and,
- (m) color (aerial perspective changes colors over distance, for example).

That is, filmic depth is evoked perceptually through *position* (of people and objects and camera)—labeled "a" through "h" above—and through light—"i" through "m." Cinematic devices can be made to "play" these cues: for example, when a wide-angle lens is used, it seems to spread space.

As will be seen in the following discussion of particular films, these cues have been used in mainstream films to express interpersonal and intrapersonal states of characters via proxemics—the spatial relationships of people to people and/or of people to objects in their environment. Frequently, depth compositions are used to evoke irony via juxtapositions within the *mise en scène*.

Deep space is also used to create realist atmospheres as well as to give actors more room in which to act. The range of usages is indeed quite large. Both the wide open spaces of spectacle films (or Westerns) and the claustrophobically small areas of a ship's rooms, for example, have been expressed via deep space arrangements. Wide-angle lenses, necessary for great depth of field, stretch optic space and also thus alter the pace of ordinary movements. Too, with such lenses, proportional and linear perspective are emphasized.

Focus and pictorial composition are, after all, ways of leading the eye of the spectator and of establishing the conventionalized codes by which the film can be read. Film scenes done in-focus uniformly through the depth of the space can cue the spectator to read the *mise en scène* as a whole, with decor details sometimes as important as actors. Proxemic information is read with the same conventionalizations that are used in real life. The codes of depth compositions have a highly specific origin, as has been noted. The history of the evolution of these depth compositions in films remains to be seen.

One of the major critical strategies advocated by many European semiological/ideological writers, Comolli included, is the search for key "structuring absences" within the body of a work. The "gaps" or "lacks" control the shape and "message" of a film, it is said, as much as the "presences." Applying this strategy to Comolli's article, I find that a perplexing "absence" there is the discussion of actual films in detail. An occasional photo caption does not make a fully worked out critique of the cinema, but this is, in effect, all Comolli gives his readers about specific films. Here is a case in point.

One of the most important historical statements Comolli makes about deep focus is that its usage "disappeared for 15 to 20 years," or from about 1920–25 to about 1940.¹¹ After noting that depth

of field from the beginning of film to about 1925 was used "naturally" (i.e., because it "came with" the technology of the early camera/lens systems), he posits the disappearance of depth effects then and their reappearance with *Citizen Kane*. This schema about the evolution of a form through film history is also the view of Patrick Ogle.¹⁵ Ogle believes that in about 1925, film depth style gave way under the combined press of technology and the influence of then-current fashions in still photography. Comolli says that the change away from depth came not just because of changes in fashion, but rather, also, because of an ideological switch from the cinema's use of "reality codes" to the use of "narrative codes"¹⁶ and because of the coming of sound: "the depth of the spoken presence greatly replaced that of depth of field."¹⁷

The proof Comolli offers for this switch is a single statement from Brunius that Renoir had great difficulty in finding some "old" good depth of field lenses in order to film in depth his *Partie de Campagne*.¹⁸ Renoir, he says, was the exception to the rule of the disappearance of depth. Bazin and Jean Mitry also agree with this conclusion, but explain the change on the basis of film-makers' choices rather than as Comolli does. Ogle, for his part, reasons that the change was due to the advent of panchromatic film stock, which brought lower-output incandescent or Mazda lamps onto the set, which in turn reduced the possible depth of field since there was less light and the camera diaphragm had to be opened up more than before (when orthochromatic film and arc lamps were in use).

An actual observation of films from the disputed period of 1925 to 1940 has led me to a different conclusion about depth style during this time. Pictorial deep space representationalism, instead, can be seen to evolve in a non-linear way along a broad gradient of styles/usages *throughout* the history of film. Depth styles can be observed before, during, and after the period of 1925–1940.

From about 1895 through 1925–29, three overall styles of pictorial depth can be generalized. The first stylistic period of 1895 to 1914 is characterized by much exterior shooting (and "interior" settings which used the sun for light); high-detail, hard-focus; and great depth of field. There is, however,

little to no use of zones of light for depth effects. Other perceptual indicators of depth, such as foreshortening or camera movement are also sparse during this time. Linear perspective and the overlap of nearer objects over far ones are heavily relied upon.

However, heuristically, it is possible to say that film-makers' "thinking in depth" has its origin at the moment when the camera was placed at a diagonal to its subject rather than "head on" at right angles to the dominant line within the chosen framing. The Lumière *L'Arrivée du Train en Gare* (1895) is a prototypical example of this effect. There, linear perspective and the relative size of objects, as well as the approach of the train, immediately key upon basic depth perceptual codes. Additionally, the very power and aesthetic attractiveness of the film is based upon the fact of this depth composition. Briefly, some other typical films of depth arrangements are: *Attack on a Chinese Mission* (1900) with movement toward the camera that explores the depth of the space; *The Pumpkin Race* (1907, Bozzetti?), same; *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912, Griffith), same—with the addition of a surprising moment in which important additional narrative information is only gradually revealed in the depth of the frame after other events have acted themselves out in the foreground; *Les Victimes de L'Alcool* (1912, Gérard Bourgeois), same—with an astonishingly sharply focused image throughout the space of the interior sets; and *Suffragette in Spite of Himself* (1912, British Edison Company), same.

It is with an Italian film, *Assunta Spina* (1914, Serena), that one can mark another phase of the evolution of depth compositional style. This film uses, in one frame at the same time, both interior and exterior spaces that involve great depth of field, sharp focus, and two planes of narrative action interacting between two planes of depth in the screen. This effect is not limited to a single scene but is a conscious device worked into the whole of the film.¹⁹ Within the period of about 1914 to about 1919, these kinds of depth features also appeared in films such as *Cabiria* (1914, Pastore); *The Italian* (1914, Ince); *Das Haus Ohne Tür* (1914, Rye and cameraman Seeber); *The Coward* (1915, Ince); *David Harum* (1915, Dwan and cameraman Rosson); *The Birth of a Nation*



ASSUNTA SPINA (1914): deep-space composition carried from interior through to distant exterior

(1915, Griffith); *Intolerance* (1916, Griffith); and, by Maurice Tourneur, *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917), *The Blue Bird* (1918), and *Victory* (1919).

The large spectacle scenes, such as in the Pastore and the Griffiths, are all done in great depth of field. Tourneur, especially, created a foregrounded framing device done in backlit silhouette with important dramatic action taking place in the mid- and reargrounds as set against the surrounding matter that occupies the foreground.²⁰ These examples and the others make this period distinctive for the deployment of depth of space in simultaneous interior and exterior spaces, in extensive and complex linear perspective, and in narratively important to and from movement of people through the spaces. It is a period when one could say true "thinking in depth" had come of age.

The next period, 1919 to about 1929, can be delineated, first, by the milestone films that "bound" it and also by the evolutionary features of depth composition within it. *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919, Wiene) can be taken as a beginning milepost since it characterizes the increased stress upon a refined *mise en scène*, with textured sets and painted-on "zoned" light (which creates spaces within the visual field which seem to have a great deal of light, while other areas of the field are in relative darkness). The German expressionist tradition created depth effects primarily in the sets rather than in real lights or with hard lenses. Films such as *Raskolnikov* (1923, Wiene), *Schatzen* (1923, Robison), *Der Letzte Mann* (1924, Murnau), *Die Freudlöse Gasse* (1925, Pabst and cameraman Seeber), *Geheimnisse Einer Seele* (1926,

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Pabst and Seeber), *Variété* (1925, Dupont and cameraman Freund), *Metropolis* (1926, Lang and Freund), and the like are ample examples of this effect.

At the same time, in this period, Eisenstein and Tisse were creating remarkable depth compositions in the Soviet montage cinema tradition and Tourneur, Stroheim, Ford, Ingram, and Murnau were creating shots in great depth of field in the Hollywood tradition (Murnau having moved during this time). Eisenstein, who was so interested in creating juxtapositional relationships between shots, also created juxtapositions of images, often ironic, *within* the depth of single-shot compositions as well. Ivor Montagu notes, "He [Tissé] also mastered the art of achieving unprecedented depth of focus, thus giving Eisenstein a third dimension for the compositional 'conflicts' in which the graphic elements of his images were relationally arranged."²¹ The depth of space rendered in the Odessa steps sequence of *Potemkin*, for example, is as much a part of the artistry as the editing.

A film such as *Mikaël* (1924, Dreyer) shot by Freund and Maté should also be cited for its interior depth creations to show both the visual compositional style of the time and the fact that national boundaries can not be used as a guide in tracing the evolution of this formal filmic element. Depth composition in 1919 to about 1929 can be seen to stress a greatly detailed refinement of *mise en scène*—especially in textures, some zoned lighting, and in to and fro movement—and a mixture of shots in great depth of field and closer, softer ones. This period blends into the next, somewhat, but it has its distinctive depth style.

The crucial question posited earlier in this article, however, centered upon the time of roughly 1925–29 to about 1940–41: the period in which it is so generally thought that depth composition disappeared. The evidence from films of the time belies this conception.

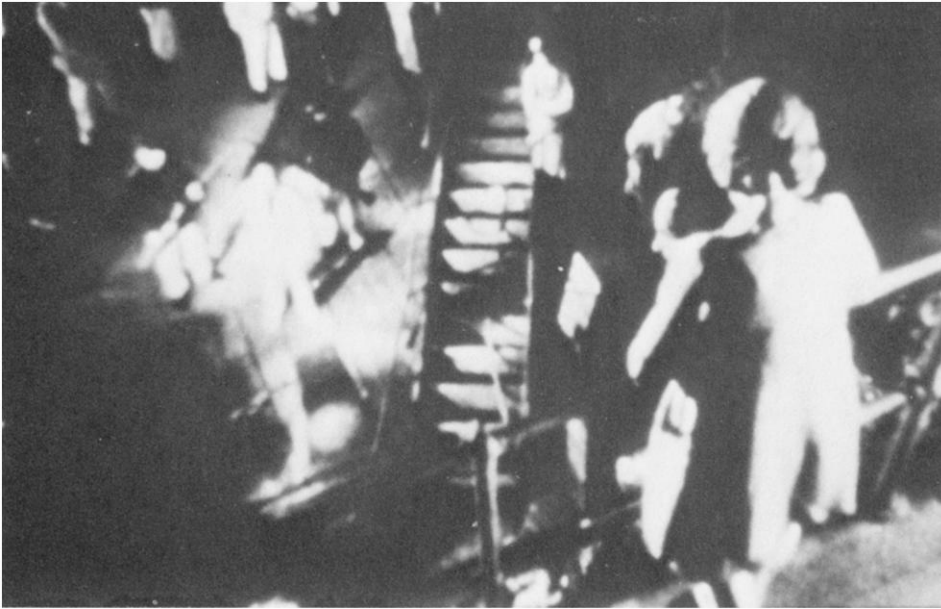
The evolving gradient of deep space illusionist creation in this time can be seen to begin with *Bulldog Drummond* (1929), although it is probably impossible to put one's finger on any one film as a final milepost for the trends I observe in this period. Nevertheless, from actual film evidence, it is clear that the period is marked by refinement



BULLDOG DRUMMOND (1929): *This is the best obtainable still from this film, though not a good example of depth.*

and great complexity of lighting in zones and the deployment of two and three planes of important, interacting "business" within the space of single film frames. Depth-perception indicators for the spectator now include sound and a fine-grain visual look. Moreover, the moving camera, clearly evident in this period (despite the limitations imposed by early sound technologies), explores and reveals a great depth of space. The dimensions of this space are beyond that for which the period has been given credit by current cinema commentary. Here are some films from *Bulldog Drummond* to *Citizen Kane* which demonstrate the depth gradient:

Bulldog Drummond (1929) was directed by F. Richard Jones, shot by Gregg Toland and George Barnes, designed by William Cameron Menzies, and produced by Goldwyn for United Artists. The rather large-appearing sets of this film are shot in great depth of field and the camera moves within them. The lobby and Drummond's room at the Inn are very deep and the characters move through the space in ways that emphasize and dramatically use the expanse. Sharp focus is maintained on the scenes throughout—from front to back—without focus-pulling. More remarkable is the long "pull back" of the camera from within the mad doctor's torture room through great depth, all in focus. At another moment in the film, a very long and twisted stairway—reeking of German expressionism—is shown with the camera angled down, emphasizing the depth via foreshortening, with a character very near the camera at the top and another very far at the bottom. Linear perspective



CONDEMNED (1929):
A steeply angled
shot with two
planes of
action.
(Ruggles;
cameramen
Toland and
Barnes)

amplifies the distance between them. Later in the film, a shot through the foregrounded chemistry apparatus toward the mad doctor in the midground also includes in its visual field the door in the distance which leads to the victim's room. Odd shadows on the rear wall add to the atmosphere as well as the depth of the scene. Importantly, all in one shot and in-focus are the elements of horror and a reminder of where the torture is to be practiced.

The many shots in *Bulldog Drummond* done in great depth of field seem to exist, first, to add a sense of realism to what is a somewhat improbable story (at times self-satirical, even); and to increase the playing area for the actors in this action-mystery-adventure genre which includes fistfights and chases. The depth is not of the Orson Welles variety nor do many of the scenes dramatically depend on its presence, but the fact remains that extensive depth of field does occur in this film. Too, some of the perceptual codes of depth are heightened to a great degree—linear perspective and camera movements, typically.

It should be remembered that from 1929 to 1931, films with scenes of great deep space compositions such as *Condemned* (1929, Ruggles, with Toland and Barnes on cameras, and Menzies on set design), *Morocco* (1930, Sternberg, with Garmes), *Billy the Kid* (1930, Vidor, with Avil),

The Bat Whispers (1930, Roland West, with Ray June and Robert Planck on cameras), *Que Viva Mexico!* (unfinished, 1931, Eisenstein, with Tisse), and *The Criminal Code* (1931, Hawks, with Howe and Tetzlaff) were being made. Just after the latter film, James Wong Howe shot William K. Howard's *Transatlantic* (1931), a film which Ogle also notes "prefigured" the depth of *Kane*.²²

Transatlantic contains many, if not all, of the features of the full deep focus films of the forties. The chase in the engine room is an excellent example since the shots there are from a variety of angles (with foreshortening) and objects and people are deployed over multi-plane space in depth. Parts of pipes and jutting machinery often fall in the close foreground and ship stairways and balconies recede into the far background while the hero and the villains chase through the space both horizontally and vertically on ladders as well as into the depth. This scene is done in very great depth of field. In other sequences, oppressive ceilings hang over the principals and props seem to be set in the foreground just to stretch the depth of the settings. Outstanding depth set-ups occur in the scenes of goodbyes from dock to ship, in the radio room, at the climax outside the room where the old man has been shot, and generally in many crowd scenes. Too, the camera is often moving which gives even greater depth indication. James Wong Howe says, on

the picture. *Transatlantic*. . . I used wide angles, deep focus throughout, long before *Kane*. Eighty per cent of the picture was shot with a twenty-five millimetre lens. . . I carried focus from five feet back to twenty, thirty feet. . . I argued with the art director, Gordon Wiles: I wanted ceilings to give the claustrophobic feeling of a ship. He did full ceilings and half ceilings for me, and I used special lights in the engine-room to give an illusion of depth, with special sets of machinery one behind the other.²³

Some of the scenes in this film look like *The White Circle*, a 1920 Maurice Tourneur film—the continuity of this effect seems to be pervasive.²⁴

Charles Barr, in his well-known article on CinemaScope, has noted the thirties depth of field work of Renoir, Hawks, and Ophüls. Of the latter two, he says that for "the organization of the space within the image," one should "see especially *The Criminal Code* and *Liebelei*. These, together with *Boudu*, make up a marvelous trio of early sound films, which if one relied upon historians one would scarcely know existed, for according to most theories they oughtn't to."²⁵ *Liebelei* (1932) was shot by Franz Planer who worked with Freund, Murmau, and Pommer. An excellent study could be done by tracing depth styles by cameramen and the influences upon them.

Other films which deserve attention for depth compositions are *Alias the Doctor* (1932, Curtiz), *Today We Live* (1933, Hawks) with ceilinged sets, and *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933, Stephen Roberts with cameraman Karl Struss). Interestingly, the young Orson Welles made his first film, *Heart of Age*, in this same period (about 1934). The film is short, about ten minutes, black-and-white, silent, and with many of the marks of a "student" film. It shows German expressionist-type of style in its odd angles and horror make-up, but there are little to no depth arrangements in it.

Almost everyone who has bothered to comment has noted that Renoir was composing films in depth all during the 30s. Bazin cites him as the precursor of Welles;²⁶ Comolli says Renoir was the exception in his use of deep spaces;²⁷ Ogle notes the same;²⁸ and Barr speaks of Renoir "compensating for the narrowness of the frame by moving the camera laterally and composing the scene in depth."²⁹ Renoir himself is quoted as saying, "I feel it necessary to have the scene set in depth in relation to the screen . . ." and to "set my actors

freely at different distances from the camera. . ."³⁰ The Renoir films in question are, most outstandingly, *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux* (1932), *Une Partie de Campagne* (shot in 1936), *Toni* (1934), *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and *La Règle de Jeu* (1939). Certainly, each of these films has many scenes pictorially composed in good depth of field. But, at least in the prints that are now available, the visual evidence from the screen shows no really sharp focus within the great depth of field. That is, the scenes are obviously set up with perspective, movements, and extensive spaces to allow room for the simultaneous juxtaposition of people (and/or things) within the same frame—usually for ironic effect—and everything visible is equally in focus. However, real "deep focus" is not in evidence since highly focused detail—high definition—is just not there, is just not a part of the visual information from the screen.

The conclusion, then (tempered by the possibility of my seeing muddy prints), is that with Renoir and perhaps others, there is another facet to the broad gradient of depth compositional usage within the history of film. Renoir, it seems, created dramatically important actions and details of the settings in relationships *in depth*. This style was rendered through the use of great depth of field, but not with highly detailed, sharp focus. An overall grey patina is the result, giving the visuals an ambience of softness even though no one deep plane is more in focus than another. It could be speculated that this effect was intentional, but it is also possible that technological limitations such as low light levels dictated the "look." (Efforts to determine the ideology of such an effect are also reduced to speculation—did Renoir wish to soften the blow of his narrative realism?) The thing we can be sure of is that Renoir is a careful artist, which implies that he would put nothing on the screen that he did not wish there. The meaning of what is there is left to generations of critics. The importance of what is observed here is the fact of depth composition visible on the screen.

To continue the documentation of whole films or film moments done in pictorial deep space in the thirties, films such as these must be also considered: *Viva, Villa!* (1934, Conway, Hawks, and others, with cameraman Howe), *Song of Ceylon* (1934, a Grierson group documentary), and—all

in 1935—*The 39 Steps* (Hitchcock), *Mad Love* (Freund with Toland), *The Dark Angel* (Franklin, with Toland), *The Scoundrel* (Hecht and MacArthur, with Lee Garmes), *Gold Diggers of 1935* (Berkeley, with George Barnes), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Reinhardt and Dieterle, with Hal Mohr), *The Flame Within* (Goulding, with Howe), *Crime and Punishment* (Sternberg, with Lucien Ballard), and *The Great Ziegfeld* (Leonard). As can be seen, depth styles transcend traditional genre classifications.

In 1936, Hal Mohr shot two films, *Green Pastures* (William Keighley and Marc Connelly directing) and *Bullets or Ballots* (Keighley), which further exemplify the period's interest in deep space compositions. Mohr says he shot these films (and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, noted above) with a kind of swing lens system he invented.³¹ (The details of the device, now, are less important than the fact that these films and Mohr's description of his lens are evidence of the desire for depth in this period.) In these two films, actors are rendered in sharp focus throughout one selected, angled plane into the depth of the screen. The fact that far and near characters are in focus is important to the development of the visual style; it is not gratuitously inserted.

In 1936, films of depth such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Lorentz, with Strand, Hurwitz, and Steiner), *These Three* (Wyler, with Toland), and *Fire Over England* (W. K. Howard, with Howe) were made. This is also the time of Eisenstein's efforts toward completing *Bezhin Meadow*, the remains of a work that show abiding interest in the juxtapositional possibilities of deep space cinematography.

Rudolph Maté, cinematographer for Dreyer's *Joan*, became, in 1937, the cameraman for Mayo's *The Adventures of Marco Polo*. In this otherwise rather unremarkable film Maté created a lighting effect prototypical of one "look" done in this period prior to classic deep focus. Maté used arc and incandescent lamps together on the sets of the Orient sequences. This effect, it has been suggested, was used in this film to give Polo's arrival in the Orient a "different look."³² The combination succeeds since the arcs and "inkies" together produce a shimmering depth effect that seems at one glance to recede markedly in sharp focus and at

another glance, appears soft and lacking in hard focus. The effect produces a very soft quality to the outlines of the edges of objects, but within the same picture are hard-edged shadows and very white highlights. The quite visually pleasing picture thus both affirms and denies the codes of depth illusion. The result is an atmosphere of fantasy or "other-worldness" that both allows the eye's explorations of the space and calls attention to its own flatness via its softness.

Depth is also in evidence in *Ready, Willing and Able* (1937, Enright, with Polito) with its big dance number on giant typewriter keys, all in deep and hard focus; *The Good Earth* (1937, Franklin, et al., with Freund and Vorkapich); *The River* (1937, Lorentz); *Dead End* (1937, Wyler, with Toland); *Lost Horizon* (1937, Capra, with Walker); *Kidnapped* (1938, Werker, with Toland); and *The Goldwyn Follies* (1938, Marshall, with Toland). It should be noted that two of these films received Academy Awards for cinematography—evidence of some interest in depth camera work/set design, at least. (1938 was also the year of the production of Eisenstein's and Tisse's *Alexander Nevsky*, with its startling depth effects.)

In 1939, Ford directed *Stagecoach* (with Glennon and Binger on cameras). This film not only employs the wide open spaces typical of the history of the Western genre, but also emphasizes characters' interpersonal relationships with deep space arrangements. The bar room, for example, is done in claustrophobic ceilinged settings, with long perspective and the foregrounding of objects for depth effect, and with the implied space of the exterior (from which will come the angry John Wayne) suggested with an open door in the background.

That was the same year as *Le Jour Se Lève* (Carné, with Courant), *Intermezzo* (Ratoff, with Toland), *Wuthering Heights* (Wyler, with Toland), *Of Mice and Men* (Milestone, with Brodine), and *Gone with the Wind* (Cukor, Fleming, et al., with Haller, Rennahan, Garmes). The existence of moments of deep space compositions in these films also puts the lie to the idea that *Citizen Kane* was the "first" film to show a proclivity for "thinking in depth."

Immediately preceding *Kane*, 1940–41 brought such important depth films as *The Long Voyage Home* (Ford, with Toland) with its frequent two-

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plane depth in shots through the ship's rigging, for example; *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ford, with Toland) heavy with wide landscapes and long diagonal lines; *Down Argentine Way* (Cummings, with Shamroy and Rennahan); *How Green Was My Valley* (Ford, with Miller) which sets the in-focus environment against the people; *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, with Edeson); and *Ball of Fire* (Hawks, with Toland). Then, in 1941, came *Citizen Kane*, and an avalanche of critical comment centered on "deep focus" began.

From the evidence in many films, then, it must be concluded that interest in deep-space cinema composition has been present from the beginning continuously (in varied forms) through the forties. Further elaboration has traced the inclination in more modern times.³³ From the beginning, however, the representation of depth has been an element in filmic creation. Depth usages historically can be seen to trace through a broad gradient of styles that *evolved* but did not "progress"—neither chronologically nor by national cinemas. "Thinking in depth" did not originate with *Citizen Kane*. Moreover, a history of the phenomenon of pictorial composition in depth must be traced along its broad gradient since *this* is the evolutionary pattern of the form. The writing of the history and theory of pictorial compositional styles has really just begun in cinema studies.

NOTES

1. Brian Henderson, "Two Types of Film Theory," *Film Quarterly*, 24, No. 3 (Spring 1971), 33-41.
2. Charles Barr, "CinemaScope: Before and After," *Film Quarterly*, 16, No. 4 (Summer 1963), 4-25.
3. Patrick Ogle, "Deep-Focus Cinematography: A Technological-Aesthetic History," *Filmmakers Newsletter*, 4, No. 7 (May 1971), 19-33 and reprinted with footnotes and a bibliography as "Technological and Aesthetic Influences Upon the Development of Deep Focus Cinematography in the United States," *Screen*, 13, No. 1 (Spring 1972), 45-72. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique et Ideologie: Camera, Perspective, Profondeur de Champ," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 229 (May-June 1971), 4-21; No. 230 (July 1971), 51-57; No. 231 (Aug.-Sept. 1971), 42-49; No. 233 (Nov. 1971), 39-45; No. 234-235 (Jan.-Feb. 1972), 94-100; and No. 241 (Sept.-Oct. 1972), 20-24.
4. Charles H. Harpole, *Gradients of Depth in the Cinema Image*. NY: Arno Press, 1978.
5. Discontent with existing cinema history is pervasive: see for example the special issue of *Cinema Journal*, 14, No. 2 (Winter



BULLETS OR BALLOTS (1936): A film shot by Hal Mohr with a lens permitting sharp focus on an angled plane.

- 1974-75). Some hope for a cure for the generality of current film histories is promised with the creation of a ten-volume international history of cinema, now planned, under the editorship of Charles Harpole. The current state of flux in cinema theory can be observed by reviewing Harpole and Hanhardt, "Linguistics, Structuralism, and Semiology, Approaches to the Cinema," *Film Comment*, 9, No. 3 (May-June 1973), 52-59; Graham Petrie, "Alternatives to Auteurs," *Film Quarterly*, 26, No. 3 (Spring 1973), 27-35; Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Appartus," *Film Quarterly*, 28, No. 2 (Winter 1974-75), 39-47; and Pascal Bonitzer, "'Realité' de la denotation," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 229 (May-June 1971), 34-41, as well as others.
6. Barry Salt, "Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures," *Film Quarterly*, 28, No. 1 (Fall 1974), 13-22; his "Film Style and Technology in the Thirties," *Film Quarterly*, 30, No. 1 (Fall 1976), 19-32; and his "Film Style and Technology in the Forties," *Film Quarterly*, 31, No. 1 (Fall 1977), 46-56.
7. Comolli, No. 233, p. 40; see footnote 3. Translation by Charles Harpole.
8. Comolli, No. 231, p. 45.
9. Part of Comolli's serialized essay has been translated and published as "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field," *Film Reader*, 2 (January 1977), 128-140.
10. Christopher Williams, "Ideas about Film Technology and the History of Cinema, with Reference to Comolli's Texts on Technology (*Cahiers du Cinéma*)," BFI/SEFT Seminar Paper, London: SEFT, April 26, no year, p. 3.
11. Williams, pp. 3-6.
12. Work by Douglas Gomery refutes this claim also (that early film was only for the lower classes); see his dissertation as well as his later work published in scattered articles.
13. J. Douglas Gomery, "Writing the History of the American Film Industry: Warner Brothers and Sound," *Screen*, 17, No. 1 (Spring 1976), 43-44, 53.
14. Comolli, No. 233, p. 43.
15. Ogle, from the *Screen* version of his article, p. 51.
16. Comolli, No. 233, p. 43.
17. Comolli, No. 234-235, p. 100.
18. Comolli, No. 234-235, p. 96.
19. Ted Perry, "Formal Strategies as an Index to the Evolution of Film History," *Cinema Journal*, 14, No. 2 (Winter 1974/75), 25-36.
20. Richard Koszarski, "Maurice Tourneur: The First of the

Visual Stylists," *Film Comment*, 9, No. 2 (March-April 1973), 24-31.
 21. Ivor Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*, NY: International Publishers, 1967, p. 25. See also Eisenstein's *Notes of a Film Director*, NY: Dover, 1970, pp. 132-133.
 22. Ogle, *Screen*, p. 45.
 23. James Wong Howe in Charles Higham, *Hollywood Cameramen*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970, pp. 83-85.
 24. Koszarski, p. 30.
 25. Charles Barr, p. 21.
 26. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Translated by H. Gray,

Vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 34.
 27. Comolli, No. 234-235, p. 95.
 28. Ogle, *Screen*, pp. 47-48.
 29. Barr, p. 143.
 30. Barr, p. 143.
 31. Hall Mohr, "A Lens Mount for Universal Focus Effects," *American Cinematographer*, 17, No. 9 (Sept. 1936), 370-371.
 32. William Stull, "Maté Blends Arcs and Inkie to Light MARCO POLO Stages," *American Cinematographer*, 19, No. 6 (June 1938), 234, 238-239.
 33. Harpole, *Gradients of Depth in the Cinema Image*, Chapters 10, 11, and 12.

KATHERINE S. KOVACS

Miguel Littín's *Recurso del Método*: The Aftermath of Allende

In March 1976, Chilean director Miguel Littín's *Actas de Marusia* (*Letters from Marusia*) was nominated for an Academy Award as best foreign film. Littín's official recognition by the Hollywood establishment was not without irony. As a filmmaker from the so-called "Third World," he had long been committed to the principle of national cinema, rejecting both the aesthetics and subject matter of Hollywood movies.

Littín is one of a number of directors from various countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who began to make movies in the sixties. Although they worked independently and developed their own distinctive styles, they became associated with the Third World film "movement" because of a shared interest in new cinematic forms and a commitment to social change. Ousmane Sembene in Senegal, Jorge Sanjines in Bolivia, and Glauber Rocha in Brazil were some of the directors who believed that the transformation of consciousness was an integral part of social revolution. They felt that film could play an important role in countering what Antonio Gramsci had called "ideological hegemony"—the beliefs, values, cultural traditions, and myths which create a consensus that perpetuates the *status quo*.¹ In

their search for ways of expressing the unique cultural identities of their own people, they rejected conventional love stories with happy endings, focused upon the fate of the group rather than the individual, and reclaimed forgotten or distorted historical incidents as well as devalued national traditions as subjects for their movies. These filmmakers saw themselves as fulfilling a higher mission than entertaining audiences. They made movies to expose conditions of life in underdeveloped countries and to arouse people to take action to change those conditions.

Littín's filmography reflects the ways in which those movies were linked to politics and social issues. His first feature, *El Chacal de Nahueltoro* (*The Jackal of Nahueltoro*), released in 1969, was made under the progressive pre-Allende government of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei.² This film is a recreation of an actual crime which had been a topic of national controversy. "Jackal" is the name given by the press to an illiterate Chilean peasant who went on a drunken spree, killing a woman and her five children. He was captured, rehabilitated, and eventually executed. Littín used the crime to show the subculture created by poverty, to criticize the sensationalistic aspects of the

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⁵ **Alternatives to Auteurs**

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⁵ **Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus**

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⁶ **Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures**

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¹⁹ **Formal Strategies as an Index to the Evolution of Film History**

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